





## \*INFLUENCE OF PRESBYTERIANISM UPON CIVIL LIBERTY\*

## An Address

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THE FLOWERS COLLECTION  
INFLUENCE OF PRESBYTERIANISM UPON CIVIL LIBERTY

There is in the Constitutions of some of the States a section to this effect: "A frequent recurrence to fundamental principles is absolutely necessary to preserve the blessings of liberty." This is a recognition by the makers of these Constitutions that there are immutable principles even in the science of government, and that they are not to be modified by the lapse of time, or varied by changing conditions. If this is true in the science of government, much more is it true in the history and growth of the Church. My address this morning, then, is largely an appeal to some of the fundamental principles of the Presbyterian Church, and its subject is the Influence of Presbyterianism upon Civil Liberty. Within the limit assigned myself, I can deal with it only in broad outline.

More than 400 years ago there was born in Noyon, France, July 10th, 1509, a man, John Calvin, the influence of whose philosophy did more to make America free, and to found its government upon a representative republic based upon equal suffrage, than that of any other man. He builded better than he knew in his form of church government. The individual congregation is the base, with its will determined and its officers elected by universal suffrage; next, the presbytery, composed of pastors, ex-officio, and ruling Elders selected by the Sessions of the various congregations composing it, and, third and last, is the General Synod, or Assembly, composed of representatives chosen by the various presbyteries. Thus we have a representative, federal republic, based upon local self government. That is the Presbyterian Church as Calvin conceived it, and that is the Presbyterian Church as it is today, and stated in ultimate terms, it is what our National Government is today.

This great theologian and philosopher "was of middle stature; his complexion was somewhat pallid and dark. His eyes, to the latest clear and lustrous, bespoke the acumen of his genius. He was sparing in his food and simple in his dress; he took but little sleep, and was capable of extraordinary

efforts of intellectual toil. He had a most retentive memory and very keen power of observation. He spoke without rhetoric, simply, directly, but with great weight. He had many acquaintances, but few close friends. His private character was in harmony with his public reputation and position. If somewhat severe and irritable, he was at the same time scrupulously just, truthful and steadfast. He never deserted a friend or took an unfair advantage of an antagonist, and on fitting occasion he could be cheerful and even facetious among his intimates. It is said of him, 'God gave him a character of great majesty,' and Beza said, 'I have been a witness of him for sixteen years, and I think I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian, such as it will not be easy to deprecate, such as it will not be easy to emulate.'"

He wrote his Institutes when he was only 26 years of age. Of this, the Ency. Brit. says, "It may be doubted if the history of literature presents us with another instance of a book written at so early an age, which has exercised such a prodigious influence upon the opinions and practices both of contemporaries and of posterity." And again, "His system had an immense value in the history of Christian thought. It appealed to and evoked a high order of intelligence, and its insistence on personal individual salvation has borne worthy fruit. So also its insistence on the chief end of man, 'to know and do the will of God,' made for the strenuous morality that helped to build up the modern world. Its effects are most clearly seen in Scotland, in Puritan England, and in the New England States, but its influence was and is felt among peoples that have little desire or claim to be called Calvinist."

John Knox, his co-laborer, and if not his disciple, certainly in thorough accord with him, carried this Calvinistic philosophy to Scotland and to England. There it took root, flourished and attained a vigorous growth. No single influence,

to the present day, has more affected the character of the peoples of those countries and their descendants in other lands. It was the direct cause of the establishment of the Commonwealth, under Cromwell. It contributed scarcely less to the Revolution of 1688, by which the power of the monarch was limited and adequate safeguards were provided for the liberties and private rights of the subject.

At one time in France, too, Calvin's doctrine bade fair to be received by a majority of the common people. In that country was, however, an all powerful Roman Hierarchy, supported by an absolute monarch. Both of these soon realized that Calvinism was their deadly foe, and that neither of them could long exist, if the French people became thoroughly indoctrinated with its tenets. So from the nature of things there must be a life and death struggle between these opposing principles. All the weapons of absolute power were then wielded against Calvinism, that it might be destroyed, root and branch, even to the culminating atrocities of the massacre of St. Bartholomew and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and thus the soberest and best citizenry of that country were either slain or driven to foreign climes. I have always felt that had the leaven of Calvinism been permitted, in France, to leaven the whole lump of its population, the history of the world since would have been wholly changed.

I have not time or space to trace the migration of Calvinists from the old to the new world, nor have I time to set out its causes and its provocation. I can deal only with its results along large lines. Freedom of conscience, religious freedom in its broad sense, was the principal impulse to this migration. Their faith had been tried in the fiery furnace of persecution, yet it "had no hurt." Instead, it had become fixed, more vital and so more vivifying.

We soon find them in possession of and dominating the whole of New England. We find them spread over western Pennsylvania and Maryland, Piedmont

Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. The Huguenot branch of this migration came to New Jersey, Delaware and South Carolina, while smaller colonies of them were to be found in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia. The influence of these was greater than their numbers. To New York came many Dutch Calvinists, and in the colonies south of New York to South Carolina, were smaller settlements of these religionists. What I have said elsewhere of the Scotch-Irish is applicable to all these Calvinist immigrants.

"The church and the school house have always been, and always will be, the mainstay of this admirable race. They realized, as few other races of men have realized it, that the church without the school house was a fosterer of superstition, while the school house without the church was a promoter of irreligion and infidelity. So, close by their churches they built their school houses, and over the doors of both they inscribed in living letters, 'The Lord He is God.' This, it seems to me, is the key to their character and the secret of their greatness."

No less applicable to them, too, is the vivid language of Froude in describing the influence of John Knox over the character of the Scotch: "No grander figure can be found in the entire history of the Reformation in this island than that of Knox - the one man without whom Scotland, as the modern world has known it, would have had no existence. His was the voice which taught the peasant of the Lothians that he was a free man, the equal in the sight of God of the proudest peer or prelate that had trampled on his fore-fathers. He was the one antagonist whom Mary Stuart could not soften, nor Maitland deceive; he it was that raised the poor Commons of this country into a stern and rugged people, who might be hard, narrow, superstitious and fanatical, but who nevertheless were men whom neither king, noble nor priest could force again to submit to tyranny."

The College of NEW JERSEY, located at Princeton, was at this time a training school for Presbyterian ministers, under Dr. Samuel Davies, and later, 1768, under Dr. John Witherspoon, a descendant of John Knox. These young preachers went into the outlying settlements, first as traveling missionaries, and later, as located pastors. Their coming meant much more than a series of sermons at certain set and stated times. It meant the erection of school houses where they had not been before, and the training of the youth of the country in all that would render them useful men and women. It meant the selection by the people themselves of a competent leader and adviser in all the higher and better things of life. Says Dr. Raper, "These bright, vigorous and independent men brought with them ideas which have exercised the profoundest influence upon all phases of our life and thought - upon our religion, our politics, our industry and our education. They deserve at the hands of the historian and at the hands of our people a thousand times more consideration and veneration than we have ever thought to pay them."

Presbyterianism then has been at all times a protest against the assumptions of priest craft on one hand and the tyranny of kings and lords on the other. Indeed, from the very nature of things, where Presbyterianism and the principles upon which it is founded are dominant, there can be no tyranny of church or state. Where they are not so strong, this great hearted minority would prefer death or expatriation to submission. When then Great Britain assumed the right, which the people of this country were not willing to yield to her, of taxation without representation, these Presbyterians who had been so indoctrinated with the right of representation as embodied in their form of church government, were the most vigorous of protesters against this form of tyranny, and were the first when their demands were not granted to urge complete separation from the mother country and absolute independence for themselves. They endured with utmost stanchness the sufferings and privations, the reverses and hope deferred, of the

succeeding long drawn out years of conflict, and when victory came, turned their thoughts to the organization of a more permanent form of government.

I must not be understood to claim that the makers of the Federal Constitution derived any conscious aid from the plan of government peculiarly the heritage of the Presbyterian Church. There are striking likenesses between the two plans in broad outline, but there are also minor differences when they are examined in detail. The Convention of 1787 realized fully that the Constitution it was making, to be acceptable to the people, must embody in it their traditions, their customs and their laws. It had come almost to an impasse in considering the great problem, how to create a national government strong enough to be effective in its sphere of action, without impairing the rights and powers of the states, when Benjamin Franklin arose and said that the longer he had lived the more convincing proofs he has seen of the truth that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow can not fall to the ground without His notice, it is not probable that an Empire could arise without His aid. Seconded by Roger Sherman, he now moved that henceforth the business of the Convention should be opened every morning with prayer. The fragmentary record does not show that the suggestion was adopted, but it was a recognition by these great men of a cardinal principle of Presbyterianism, the Superintending Providence of the Almighty in all the affairs of men and nations. The differences in the Convention were soon reconciled, with the result that a Senate was provided for which represented the States and a House, which represented the people. This is a reflection to some degree of the Presbyterian System - the people represented in the churches and presbyteries, and the presbyteries in the General Assembly.

Again, when individuals are subjected to the influence of great principles, they react upon

them, and are reflected in their habit of thought and in their conduct. They, thus, become instinctive ideas to the individual, upon which he subconsciously acts. In this sense the influence of the Presbyterian form of government upon the Convention of 1787 may have been great, how great, we have no means of determining. We do know that many of its members were Presbyterian, or had been subjected to Presbyterian influence.

Having thus seen the large part that Presbyterianism played in the securing of our liberties and the establishment of our government upon a firm basis, what part is it to play in the future against the foes of both? If it is to be a great part it must hold fast to the faith once delivered to the saints. It may adopt the machinery of modern life, but its faith must not be dimmed by its materialism, or its intelligence beclouded by its fallacies. It must remember that while it is its duty to take part in every good word and work, that is not its main mission, for, to it, as the Bride of Christ, the Saviour, are committed the Oracles of God. Here, it seems to me, is the point of danger for the Church at the present time and for the future. Religion is not a system of morals, it is not a philosophy, it is not a science, but it is a conscious relation between man and God, and the expression of that relation in human conduct.

The existence of this relationship manifests itself, first, in the due and loving performance of one's obligations to his fellow man; second, in the due and loving performance of one's obligations to God the Creator, to God the Saviour, and to God the Comforter, and Sustainer: third, but greatest of all, the performance of God's obligations to His creature and servant. In the first instance this relationship is moral; in the second, it is spiritual, and in the third, it is mystical. In the last instance is most seen the insidious and corrosive effect of modern brutally frank materialistic literature upon churches and church members. A religion that has not its

miracles and its mysteries is not a religion at all, but a philosophy. The man who views the phenomena of life only from the standpoint of their material manifestations can stand on no common ground with the Christian. As well expect sympathy between the mole, which in darkness pursues his subterranean way, and the bird that from the topmost bough of some tall tree greets the rising sun with his song of praise. The mole can not be convinced that there is a sun, because the ordinary phenomena of nature that come within his ken do not show its existence, but the bird knows that there is a sun, because it has experienced the enlivening warmth of its rays. Ah, those old Presbyterians, our ancestors, call them hard and narrow and superstitious if you will, yet with their "Thus saith the Lord," they solved the riddle of time and eternity. To them, life was a walking in the fear of God. To them, death was its final sacrament, in which Christ, the Saviour, was to keep His part of the covenant, so they met it with the sublime but childlike faith of John, the Revealer, or of David, the Shepherd King.

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